



Idaho's Worst Idea

State senators got caught in a wolf trap.

By Chance Gowan

In what has to be one of the most shortsighted moves in the history of the Idaho Legislature, its members recently voted to kill 90 percent of the wolves in Idaho. On the surface, if you're a livestock producer or a hunter or just a concerned citizen, this may have sounded like a good idea and, on the surface, it wasn't the worst idea they ever had. However, not only did they fail to consider the practicality of this pandering move, they also neglected to contemplate the repercussions from almost every "nonprofit" environmental organization in the United States and around the world. In doing so, they've armed these groups with the gift of an unending supply of money from well meaning but woefully misled environmentally minded citizens; monies with which they are now threatening to sue every state wildlife agency in wolf country as well as the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, which manages the Endangered Species Act.

Sadly, the Idaho Senate's legislation will likely result in actions from the FWS to significantly reduce the states' ability to manage rapidly increasing wolf populations. The loss of local management will have the collateral effect of devastating the states' already declin-

ing big-game populations, greatly increase depredation on domestic livestock, escalate threats to human life, and perpetuate financial devastation to small towns across the country that depend on an influx of money from hunters. If there are no animals to hunt, because the wolves ate them, the hunters won't come. When big-game populations are diminished, wolves will simply shift their efforts to domestic livestock and pets, and ultimately children.

If you've been following the wolf debate at all, then you already know that in the last 20 years their numbers have skyrocketed across many of the lower 48 states and, as a result, wolves have been delisted by the FWS because their numbers no longer warrant protection. For example, over the last 10 years wolf populations have increased, on average, at a rate of 35 percent per year in Washington and Oregon—both states that, due to their liberal politics, have refused to manage wolf populations and, as a result, are now suffering serious consequences to native wildlife as well as huge financial losses to their rural citizens.

One of the primary reasons that the actions of the Idaho senators were so misguided is that wolf populations have been rel-

atively stable in Idaho. Wolf hunters in Idaho have been blessed with access to a near limitless number of wolf tags. But having wolf tags and actually filling them are two entirely different things. It takes a lot of time, effort, and luck to fill even a single tag. Concurrently, livestock producers have been allowed to shoot these marauding predators without special permits whenever their livestock are being threatened or killed. This management strategy has resulted in an equilibrium in wolf populations that also exceeds minimum numbers dictated by the FWS.

So here's the problem: Minimum threshold values for wolves in Idaho are "at least 150 wolves," which roughly equates to about 15 packs, assuming 10 animals per pack. Ostensibly, the actions of the state Senate aimed to drop the number of wolves down to "minimum threshold values" were supposed to make everybody happy. Except there is no way FWS is going to stand back and watch Idaho's wolf numbers drop precipitously for very long without stepping in.

However, even with the currently liberal availability of tags for Idaho hunters and trappers and allowing for agricultural producers to protect their livestock from threats by these killers, wolf-control measures carried out by private citizens and state and federal authorities only result in the taking of about 500 wolves per year. This is approximately equal to the annual recruitment to the population (e.g., pup production).

The legislation also allows for hunting of wolves with ATVs and snowmobiles while providing approximately \$310,000 for professional hunters/trappers and bounties for wolves in general. It will also provide for aerial gunning (shooting wolves from aircraft) by state and federal authorities.

One might think these actions, although controversial, would result in significant drops in wolf numbers across the state. But the truth is, hunters and trappers already have nearly unfettered access to tags and they are barely holding wolf numbers at current levels. The new legislation also provides for "year-round" hunting and trapping of wolves, which is essentially a pipe dream. Hunters harvest wolves for their pelts, mostly as trophies, and trappers harvest pelts for resale in a robust fur market. The problem is, wolf pelts are only valuable during a few months of the year when they are "prime." There would be little reason for sportsmen or trappers to spend time, money and energy hunting down wolves when their pelts are essentially without value. If the expectation



It takes many thousands of deer, elk, and livestock to feed Idaho's burgeoning wolf population. How long will it be before people are added to their menu? BELOW: A walk in the park will now become a lot more dangerous, thanks to the Idaho Senate. OPPOSITE: The Idaho Senate sets a wolf trap then steps in it.

of reducing wolf numbers by 90 percent were even close to being met, the state would be compelled to hire hunters or pay bounties to legions of hunters and trappers. Can you imagine the outcry from “environmentalists” as they sensationalize these actions?

A bounty system from the state might entice hunters and trappers to continue this work year-round, but there is little reason to expect their success rates would increase enough to drastically reduce wolf numbers. Aerial gunning could put a measurable dent in wolf populations and distribution, but even aerial gunning isn't always effective and it's costly and controversial.

States should have the freedom and latitude to manage wolves as they see fit. Reducing Idaho's wolf numbers is a great idea. Fifteen hundred wolves in Idaho is way too many! Conflicts between wolves and private citizens are increasing rapidly. The current number of 1,500 wolves in Idaho is also having a major impact on big-game populations and livestock producers across the state. The general notion of the Idaho Senate's legislation is admirable. But the manner in which it chose to implement this new legislation com-



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pletely ignored potential reactions from the lawyers of environmental nonprofits, who smell money and lots of it. Sadly, and unfortunately, it's too late now.

On Feb. 10, 2022, U.S. District Court Judge Jeffrey White of the Northern District of California ruled in favor of three radical animal rights groups, which are advocating for the return of wolf populations and distri-

bution to presettlement levels. While that ruling doesn't expressly cover Idaho, the litigation was likely precipitated by the Idaho Senate's ruling. Now the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS, which was recently convicted under RICO, the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act) and at least 12 other “environmental” organizations have already filed lawsuits in federal court against the secretary of the Interior (who oversees the FWS). These legal actions were directly precipitated by the Idaho Senate's decision to slaughter 90 percent of the state's wolf population. The direct intent of this litigation is to return management of wolf populations to federal authorities and expand wolf protection.

This litigation has now become a federal matter and will almost certainly be settled out of court. Multifaceted threats of litigation nearly always cause federal agency leaders to cave in and agree to nearly anything. It saves the Department of Interior from years of bad press and expensive litigation and provides the litigants with a couple of

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especially large bonuses.

Using their “sue and settle” scheme the litigants typically get nearly everything they want. And they are reimbursed for expenses (both real and perceived) incurred during the development of their initial suit, which is an intangible number because sympathetic lawyers often work for these nonprofits pro bono. The nonprofits are also reimbursed for the costs of paying their staff for researching, developing and marketing the litigation, even though their paid staff (which is huge) is on salary and those expenses would have been incurred whether they filed suit or not.

Additionally, CBD, HSUS and many other nonprofits will use this victory in advertising blitzes to demonstrate to their donors what great things they are doing while concurrently begging for donations to save the green-eyed mud slug. Worst of all, it's now extremely likely that principal management of wolf populations will return to the FWS which, as a direct result of the Senate's actions, will likely designate wolves as federally threatened under the Endangered Species Act. This outcome will be a disaster for Idaho and other states and will almost surely result in a significant reduction in states' abilities to manage their own wolf populations. In a nutshell: if this happens, wolf populations will skyrocket!

This didn't have to happen. The Senate could have quietly increased appropriations to Idaho Department of Fish & Game, allowing it to increase bag limits for wolves, extend seasons, pay bounties to hunters, allow hunting from ATVs and snowmobiles, and quietly step up its own wolf removal efforts, including aerial gunning. It's obvious that 1,500 wolves in Idaho are way too many! The Idaho Senate's failure to consider the big-picture ramifications of its actions while pandering for votes has backfired and has now triggered serious consequences that will decimate wildlife populations and plague agricultural producers and sportsmen for many years. ■

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